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ABSTRACT

Classroom techniques associated with conflict management and the six stages in the Managing Interpersonal Conflict (MIC) technique that can be used in basic interpersonal communication courses are outlined in this paper. Before presenting information on the MIC technique, the paper discusses the use of Jay Hall's Conflict Management Survey (which measures styles of conflict management along the dimensions of concern for personal goals and concern for relationship) as a teaching device showing students their conflict styles and leading them to a discussion of developing an idealized style of conflict management. The explanation of the MIC technique emphasizes its six stages of conflict management, including (1) evaluating the conflict, (2) defining the conflict, (3) identifying goals mutually shared by both persons, (4) identifying a number of possible ways to resolve the conflict or solve the problem, (5) weighing goals against possible resolutions, and (6) evaluating the resolution after it has been put into effect for a period of time. In presenting these stages of the MIC technique, relevant interpersonal communication skills are discussed, along with examples of how each skill can be used in particular situations. (RL)

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MIC Technique: Managing Interpersonal Conflict

A Unit in Conflict Management Communication Skills

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MIC: Managing Interpersonal Conflict

A Unit in Conflict Management Communication Skills

Managing conflict through effective communication is a useful skill for anyone interested in building and maintaining satisfying relationships. That conflict is inevitable in most relationships at some time or another is articulated in a wide variety of sources, from theoretical treatments[1] to communication textbooks[2] to popular magazines.[3] If it is true that conflict will affect each of our relationships, it is important that courses in interpersonal communication address the topic and teach students how to manage conflict effectively.

Another impetus for teaching conflict management skills comes from a recent trend in over 100 cities within the U.S. to set up informal mediation processes to handle various complaints coming before local officials.[4] In Columbus, Ohio, such mediation techniques are employed by the police to handle disputes between neighbors, while in Boston's Dorchester section, community members are trained as part-time mediators to handle such cases. These programs offer a variety of career opportunities for persons trained in effective conflict management. For these reasons, the inevitability of conflict in human relationships and the potential for career opportunities for those trained in conflict management techniques, interpersonal communication courses should include a unit on conflict management skills.

Whether presented in my basic interpersonal communication course or in my interviewing course, conflict management techniques are one of the last topics addressed in the course. By that time, students have been introduced to a variety of interpersonal communication topics. To manage

conflict effectively, they find it necessary to apply all the communication skills they have learned in the conflict context. Thus, not only is learning to manage conflict a useful new skill, but it is also a test of the ability to use other interpersonal communication skills learned in the course.

Outline of the Unit

1. Definition of Conflict: While conflict has been defined in a variety of ways,[5] the type of conflict best managed through the technique to be outlined is "simple conflict." Simple conflict occurs when Person A wants something different than Person B, and neither can get what he or she wants without preventing the other person from getting what he or she desired.

2. Styles of Conflict Management: How a person might deal with conflict can be measured in at least four ways.[6] The Hall instrument[7] is used in this unit to help students identify their preferred style of conflict management. The Conflict Management Survey assesses a person's style of conflict management along two dimensions: concern for personal goals and concern for relationship. A grid format depicts each dimension along a nine-point scale in which the value "1" denotes a low or minimal concern for the dimension. Thus, a 1/1 (low concern for goals and relationship) denotes a lose-leave style or a conflict avoider, a 1/9 (low concern for goals and high concern for relationship) denotes a yield-lose style or a conflict smoother, a 5/5 (moderate concern for goals and relationship) denotes a compromise style, a 9/1 (high concern for goals and low concern for relationship denotes a win-lose style or conflict forcer, and a 9/9 (high concern for goals and relationship) denotes a synergistic style or a conflict confronter, problem-solver. The Conflict Management Survey provides information about a person's strength of preference for each of the five styles both from the standpoint of general overall preference and in terms of personal, interpersonal, small group and intergroup contexts.

Students are asked to complete the survey before class. It is not advisable to administer the survey in class because it takes at least 45 minutes to complete. During class students are assisted in scoring, plotting, and interpreting their preferences for the five styles of conflict management. While it is stressed that the ability to employ all styles at various times is important, the 9/9 approach is given the most favorable review for several reasons: (1) most people have never been exposed to the 9/9 approach to conflict management; therefore, because it is a productive and constructive way to manage conflict, learning this technique proves to be quite useful for most people; (2) most people have been exposed to the win-lose approach to conflict management since childhood and, therefore, need no instruction in the method; (3) people who consistently employ the yield-lose and lose-lose methods are unhappy with the outcomes they obtain, so they are pleased when introduced to a method which helps them face a conflict situation and at the same time deal with their own personal goals.

Once students have examined the results of the survey, a discussion is generated around the following topics: (1) Would you have predicted that your preferences for the conflict styles would have fallen in the order they did? (2) Did you realize you relied so heavily upon particular styles and failed to use others? (3) What do you think about these styles of conflict management? Do you feel we have exhausted the list of possible styles? (4) Realizing the basic philosophy of the 9/9 style, how would you go about handling a conflict situation from a 9/9 perspective?

Following a discussion of the students' ideas on how to manage conflict from a 9/9 perspective, I present my own ideas on managing conflict in this manner.[8] I call the technique the MIC: Managing Interpersonal Conflict. The technique has six stages. Ideally, both persons trying to manage the conflict know the technique, but since that is probably unlikely, I present

the technique to the students as though each of them will be the only person in the interaction who knows the technique. I recommend that they be honest with the other person and simply say: "We aren't getting anywhere handling this conflict. How about trying a method I learned in a class I took." Or before the situation even gets that far, they might say: "This is going to be a hard situation to manage. In order that we deal with it constructively, would you mind trying a technique for managing conflict that seems to work for others?" When attempting to help two other persons work through a conflict situation, it is quite possible for the conflict manager to say: "These are the stages we are going to progress through in trying to solve this problem."

MIC Technique

In presenting the six stages in the Managing Interpersonal Conflict Technique, I incorporate the relevant interpersonal communication skills learned in the course at the appropriate stages. These skills are included, along with examples of each, in the discussion of the MIC Technique.

Stage 1: Intrapersonal Evaluation of the Conflict.

A. What is causing the conflict?

B. Where and when should the individuals talk about the conflict?

During this stage persons should get in touch with what is really bothering them. Individually, they should focus on their feelings, ideas, and perceptions of all the factors which they feel are contributing to the conflict. Skills which are important at this stage include:

1. The ability to identify, own, and describe one's feelings.

   Ignoring One's Feelings: "There's no use talking about this situation: I'm fed up with his whole attitude."

   Confronting One's Feelings: "I feel angry, hurt, and unimportant."

2. The ability to describe (rather than evaluate) the behavior of the other person.

   Evaluating Behavior: "Joe always puts his feelings first; he never takes into account what I might think about anything."

   Describing Behavior: "Three times Joe has not asked for my input on important decisions: when he bought the new car; when he took a job in California; and when he enrolled the children in that private school."

3. The ability to separate fact from inference.

   Inference: "Joe treats me this way because he's trying to show me he's the boss around here."

   Fact: "Joe has never behaved this way before. I don't know why he has suddenly changed."

4. The ability to empathize with the other person.

   Nonempathic: "He'll never talk with me about anything that's important."

   Empathic: "I'll ask him when it would be a good time to talk about this situation when we get home from work tonight and after we have had dinner."

Stage 2: Interpersonal--Defining the Conflict.

A. What is causing the conflict from both individual's perspectives?

B. Can both persons agree on the definition of the conflict?

During this stage persons should aid each other in discovering the nature and causes of the conflict. This stage requires the balanced use of a large number of skills:

1. The ability to ask nonjudgmental questions in an effort to encourage the other person to participate in discovering the nature and causes of the problem.

   Judgmental Question: "Why are you so inconsiderate?"

   Nonjudgmental Question: "Why didn't you talk with me about your plans to buy a new car?" (Probably shouldn't bring up move and school at this point. Joe will feel bombarded and, besides, he may not see them as related to the car decision. However, the conflict manager should eventually show how these three decisions are related to the overall nature of the conflict.)

2. The ability to encourage the other to ask nonjudgmental questions. Skills #2, 4, 6, 8, 10 rest upon one's use of skills #1, 3, 5, 7, 9 and the conflict manager's ability to create an overall supportive climate within which to manage the conflict. Reciprocity of behaviors is predicted.

3. The ability to paraphrase the other person's comments.

   Evaluative Reaction: "You're wrong about that."

   Paraphrase: "So you thought that because I was in the midst of running Hudson's senatorial campaign that I wouldn't be concerned about the type of new car we got?

4. The ability to encourage the other to paraphrase comments.

5. The ability to check one's perception of how the other feels.

   Evaluative Reaction: "Why do you get so upset about something as insignificant as that?"

Checking one's perception of another's feelings: "So you felt abandoned when you had to go to the office party alone the night I had to go to that political rally for Hudson. Am I right?"

6. The ability to encourage the other to check his/her perception.
7. The ability to own and describe one's feelings (includes ability to self-disclose).

   Camouflaging one's feelings: "I'm fed up with your whole attitude."

   Owning and describing one's feelings to the other person: "Well, I'm feeling hurt, unimportant, and somewhat abandoned myself lately."

8. The ability to encourage the other to own and describe feelings.
9. The ability to describe (rather than evaluate) the behavior of the other.

   Evaluating Other's Behavior: "You're inconsiderate. You always put your feelings first and you never take into account what I think about anything."

   Describing Other's Behavior: "Joe, did you realize that on three occasions you have not asked for my input on important decisions: when you bought the new car; when you took a job in California; and when you enrolled the children in that private school?"

10. The ability to encourage the other to describe (rather than evaluate) behavior.
11. The ability to separate fact from inference.

    Inference: "You treat me that way because you're trying to re-establish your position as boss around here."

Fact: "I can't figure out why you're acting this way; you have never done it before."

12. The ability to empathize with the other person.

Empathic: "Thanks for agreeing to talk with me tonight about this situation."

13. The ability to send congruous verbal and nonverbal messages.

If a person says that he or she is interested in understanding the other's perspective then the person should communicate that interest through all available non-verbal means: reinforcing eye contact, body orientation in relationship to the other person, environmental factors which aid discussion, and genuinely interested vocal cues.

14. The ability to avoid tangential responses.

Tangential response: Person A: "Why did you leave me out of those decisions?"

Person B: "You're pretty inconsiderate yourself you know!"

Nontangential response: Person A: "Why did you leave me out of those decisions?"

Person B: "Because I thought you were too busy to be interested."

<u>Stage 3: Interpersonal--Identifying Goals Mutually Shared by Both Persons which Impact on the Conflict and Its Satisfactory Resolution</u>.

A. What goals are the people attempting to satisfy with their individual resolutions to the conflict?

B. Which of these goals do the individuals mutually share?

C. Which of the goals identified in "A" and "B" are important in formulating a resolution? Can these goals be framed as mutual goals?

D. Can the people involved agree on a list of mutually shared goals?

This is probably the most important stage of the MIC. The overriding purpose of this stage is to understand the needs and desires of the other person as well as make one's needs and desires clear. Needs and desires are not to be confused with solutions or possible resolutions to the conflict. They refer to the ultimate goals each person is attempting to satisfy through conflict resolution. While most writers maintain that the focus should be only upon identifying mutually shared goals at this point, I have purposely included as the first phase of this stage the honest disclosure of each person's individual goals. This seems justified and realistic for several reasons: (1) If the parties involved continue to employ the skills suggested in Stage 2, they can handle this phase constructively even though it may be difficult to express goals which may not entirely take into account the needs and desires of the other person. (2) If the disclosure of individual goals uncovers vastly different needs and desires (for example, a grossly uneven commitment to the relationship), it seems that such revelations may prevent the continuance of an eventually very unsatisfying relationship. (3) Through disclosure of individual goals, persons may find reason to take another look at Stage 2; that is, the nature and the causes of the conflict may need a re-examination given the new information disclosed. It would be more advantageous for this to occur earlier in the MIC Technique than later.

The skills listed in Stage 2 are also appropriate to this stage, however, there are several additions to that list:

1. The ability to identify the positive aspects of the conflict management effort as mutually shared goals.

   "Your agreeing to talk with me about the situation shows me that we are in agreement about one important goal: Maintaining

a healthy relationship. I'm glad that that is as important to you as it is to me."

2. The ability to be problem-oriented (rather than controlling) in one's communicative behavior.

   Controlling Behavior: "One goal that I have and you should too, because we agreed on it when we got married, is that I should be a part of every decision made which affects our relationship."

   Problem-oriented Behavior: "I know we agreed on certain goals when we got married, but maybe we need to look at those again and change or add a few. What do you think about that?"

3. The ability to encourage problem-oriented behavior in the other. If the conflict manager talks about the goals with a "we" orientation and continues to ask for the other's ideas and reactions, problem-oriented behavior will be encouraged.

Stage 4: Interpersonal--Identifying a Number of Possible Ways to Resolve the Conflict or Solve the Problem.

A. What are the possible ways to resolve the conflict?

B. Have the parties exhausted all the possible ways to resolve the conflict?

The primary objective of this stage is to generate a wide variety of ways to resolve the conflict. Obviously, the two persons should attempt to go far beyond their original resolutions which they individually desired before the MIC Technique was employed.

Along with the skills suggested for Stages 2 and 3, the following skills are unique to Stage 4:

1. The ability to communicate provisionalism (rather than dogmatism).

   Dogmatic Response: "Well, the only solution I see to this whole situation is for us to set one hour aside every night before we go to bed and force ourselves to talk about all the things we haven't been discussing lately."

   Provisionalistic Response: "One thing we might try is to set one hour each night aside for our own conversation--sort of our own private time, no interruptions allowed."

2. The ability to encourage provisionalism in the other person.

   Skills #2 and 4 rest upon the prediction of reciprocal behavior.

3. The ability to refrain from prematurely evaluating the other's solution.

   Premature evaluation: "But that won't meet the goal of being seen as individuals as well as a couple by our friends."

   Provisionalistic response: "Put it down on the list. We'll weigh it against the goals later."

4. The ability to discourage the other person from prematurely evaluating the solutions.

It is useful to note at this point that the descriptions and skills discussed for Stages 2, 3, and 4 have assumed that the disclosure of causes, goals, and solutions will readily occur when the individuals begin to manage conflict with the MIC Technique. Ideally, this would be the case; however, if t he parties experience difficulty in readily discussing each step, they might consider making individual written lists of causes, goals, and resolutions to use in their joint discussions.

Stage 5: Interpersonal--Weighing Goals Against Possible Resolutions.

A. How does each resolution stand up against the goals identified in Stage 3?

B. Which resolution satisfies the largest number of goals?

C. Can the individuals involved agree on the best resolution?

The purpose of the step is to weigh all the goals outlined in Stage 3 against all the possible resolutions uncovered in Stage 4. Thus, it is important that both persons work together throughout this stage. It is not useful for each person to work individually at any phase of this stage because all perceptions, ideas, and feelings at this point are vital to the determination of the best resolution.

All skills listed for the previous steps are relevant to Stage 5, along with these additions.

1. The ability to communicate spontaneity (rather than strategy) when reacting to the relationships between goals and resolutions.

   Strategic Response: Strategy can be perceived when one is less involved in relating goals to the solutions offered by the other. If one goes through the MIC Technique and reaches this stage but is interested only when discussing his/her solutions, that person has reduced the effort to a mere win-lose situation and will certainly be perceived as acting in his/her best interest (i.e., strategic).

   Spontaneous Response: Full involvement in weighing all goals against <u>all</u> solutions.

2. The ability to encourage spontaneity in the other. Reciprocity of behavior is predicted here.

Stage 6: Interpersonal--Evaluating the Resolution After it Has Been Put Into Effect for a Period of Time.

A. How is the resolution working?

B. Do the individuals involved need to modify it in any way?

C. When will the people meet again to discuss how the resolution is working?

The purpose of this step is to encourage individuals to realize that managing conflict is processual in nature. That is, persons and their perceptions, along with situations and their components, change over time. Because a conflict was resolved at one point in time does not mean that the resolution will remain a satisfactory one forever. The MIC Technique incorporates the need to review resolutions from time to time, along with the viewpoint that conflict is inevitable and must be viewed as something to be dealt with constructively and productively and not as something to be avoided.

Along with the skills presented in the previous steps, the following addition is relevant to Stage 6: The ability to be honest with oneself and the other person and to simply say, "We need to talk about this situation again."

Conclusions About the MIC Technique

By definition a 9/9 approach to conflict management assures that both person's goals are not mutually exclusive. While people may experience conflict which appears manageable only if one person gets his or her way, once they agree to use the MIC Technique or manage conflict in the 9/9 style, they communicate the hope that their conflict will not be reduced to a win-lose situation. Thus it is that the MIC Technique is as much a

measure of attitude toward managing conflict as it is a measure of the outcomes achieved.

A large part of the attitude necessary to successfully accomplish the technique is mutual trust. In class, I used the technique to role play with a student a conflict she was having with a co-worker. The role play ended with what seemed to me to be a workable resolution that met both person's goals. The student insisted that she had previously gotten to this point with the co-worker and the woman never fulfilled her side of the resolution. As it turned out, the co-worker did not possess the appropriate attitude to manage the conflict with a 9/9 approach. A student observer maintained that that was quite predictable because you can't really manage conflicts with a 9/9 style. While I could not agree with that conclusion, I do believe that the technique is not for everyone nor every situation. As with all communication strategies, one makes a choice about the best way to accomplish a particular outcome. Perhaps the MIC Technique is only for relationships in which trust has been repeatedly demonstrated. On the other hand, perhaps the technique itself can help create trust. No doubt it can, but no doubt the effective communicator will consider a wide range of strategies when deciding how to manage conflict. The MIC Technique is offered as one strategy to consider.

Footnotes

[1]Rensis Likert and Jane Gibson Likert, New Ways of Managing Conflict (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), pp. 1-9; Kenneth Thomas, in Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, ed. Marvin D. Dunnette (Chicago: Ran McNally, 1976), pp. 889-935.

[2]Robert J. Doolittle, "Conflicting Views of Conflict: An Analysis of Basic Speech Communication Textbooks," Communication Education, 26 (March 1977), 121-127; Joyce Hocker Frost and William W. Wilmot, Interpersonal Conflict (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1978), p. 8; Rudolph F. Verderber and Kathleen S. Verderber, Inter-Act: Using Interpersonal Communication Skills, 2nd ed. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1980), p. 201; John Stewart and Gary D'Angelo, Together: Communicating Interpersonally, 2nd ed. (Reading, Massachusetts, 1980), p. 269; Ronald B. Adler, Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, Neil Towne, Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980), p. 278.

[3]Judith Thurman, "Fear of Fighting," in Ms., 7 (October 1978), 47-48; "Teaching How to Cope with Workplace Conflicts," Business Week, February 18, 1980, p. 136.

[4]"Cutting Courts: Settlements Without Judges," Time, March 24, 1968, p. 65.

[5]L. R. Pondy, "Organizational Conflict: Concepts and Models," in Management of Change and Conflict, eds. John M. Thomas and Warren G. Bennis (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 360-366; Harold L. Raush, William A. Barry, Richard K. Hertel, and Mary Ann Swain, Communication, Conflict, and Marriage (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1974), p. 30;

Gerald R. Miller and Mark Steinberg, Between People: A New Analysis of Interpersonal Communication (Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1975), pp. 264-270; Verderber and Verderber, pp. 201-204.

[6]Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann, "Comparison of Four Instruments Measuring Conflict Behavior," Psychological Reports, 42 (1978), 1139.

[7]Jay Hall, Conflict Management Survey: A Survey of One's Characteristic Reaction to and Handling of Conflicts Between Himself and Others (The Woodlands, Texas: Teleometrics Int'l, 1973).

[8]The MIC Technique is the product of a variety of sources. The most influential sources are: Alan C. Filley, Interpersonal Conflict Resolution (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1975); Thomas Gordon, Leader Effectiveness Training (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1977); George R. Bach and Peter Wyden, The Intimate Enemy: How to Fight in Love and Marriage (New York: Avon Books, 1968).

[9]The ability to employ a wide variety of interpersonal communication skills is the position taken by a number of recent textbooks and reaffirmed by the MIC Technique. Sources which have influenced the skills included in the MIC Technique are: Jack R. Gibb, "Defensive Communication," Journal of Communication, 11 (September 1961), 141-148; Ann Marie Evans, A Skills Approach to Negotiating Conflict in Relationships, paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English (Kansas City, Missouri: November, 1978); David W. Johnson, Human Relations and Your Career: A Guide to Interpersonal Skills (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978); Frost and Wilmot, pp. 86-143; William V. Haney, Communication and Interpersonal Relations, 4th ed. (Homewood, Illinois: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1979); Verderber and Verderber, pp. 337-347.